

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 16, 2005

POINT ST. GEORGE PHASE 1 ENHANCEMENT

File No. 05-048

Project Manager: Jim King

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$340,000 to the County of Del Norte to implement the first phase of public access and resource protection improvements at Point St. George.

LOCATION: Pt. St. George near Crescent City, Del Norte County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Point St. George Management Plan
2a, 2b, 2c, 2d, 2e

Exhibit 3: Site Map

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 et seq. of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred forty thousand dollars (\$340,000) to the County of Del Norte (“the County”) to design and implement public access and natural resource protection improvements consistent with the recommendations of the Point St. George Management Plan, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of funds, the County shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, names of the contractors it intends to employ for the project and a signing plan acknowledging the Conservancy and Proposition 40 funding;

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2. The County shall ensure that signs acknowledging Conservancy and Proposition 40 funding are installed at the project sites in the manner approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer."

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

"Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 6 of Division 21 (Sections 31251 et seq.) of the Public Resources Code, regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access.
3. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

This authorization would provide up to \$340,000 to the County of Del Norte to implement phase one of public access and natural resource enhancement improvements at Point St. George. It would also fund engineering and design for improvements for future phases, all in accordance with the Point St. George Management Plan (Exhibit 2). This first stage of work is essential to protect the resources of the site and to improve public access to the 339-acre Point St. George property that was purchased in part with Conservancy funds in 2002.

The Point St. George Management Plan highlights the site's assets and the constraints associated with use of the property. It provides a conceptual framework for balancing public use with the protection of natural and cultural resources found there. It establishes guidelines for achieving the desired balance and outlines priority actions that constitute the primary elements of this funding request. The plan provides for implementing the project in phases with an emphasis on safeguarding Point St. George from human impacts in the first phase. Conservancy funding support would allow both the County of Del Norte and the Conservancy to achieve public access and resource protection objectives that initially prompted the acquisition of the property. Specifically, the proposed authorization would enable the County to proceed with several implementation projects as discussed below.

- Guardrail construction – The County will construct a guardrail along the west side of Radio Road, the entranceway to the property (Exhibit 3, Site Map). This is urgently needed to safeguard sensitive coastal bluff habitats from entry by off-road vehicles, a frequent occurrence at the site. Existing barriers and fences have proven insufficient and damages are mounting from illegal off-road vehicles.

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- Fencing - The County will construct fencing and other improvements on the east side of Radio Road to institute rotational grazing as recommended in the management plan. The grazing program is intended to invigorate a seasonal wetland habitat area that is home to several rare plant species and requires action to prevent its conversion to a more common habitat type.
- Coastal Trail – The County will sign and designate a 2-mile length of the California Coastal Trail. This involves the decommissioning and restoration of other duplicative trail segments across the property and an accompanying signage linking Tolowa Dunes State Park to the northeast and Crescent City's Pebble Beach to the south.
- Parking lot improvements - the County will construct modest improvements to a small parking lot at Garth's Beach near the entrance to the property.

In addition, the proposed authorization would provide for additional detailed planning for elements identified in the management plan, including engineering and design for restrooms, and improvements to the primary parking lot and interpretive elements likely to be located at the terminus of Radio Road, where most visitors embark on trails to view the point of the headland and the sea.

The site planning and design work is not of a routine nature. It is made significantly more complex by the presence of known archaeological resources in the vicinity and the need for interpreting the site's rich cultural history and unusual natural features while, at the same time, responding to repeated expressions from the public for maintaining the wild nature of the site. An element of the proposed Phase I project thus is preparation of a detailed archaeological resource management program that is sufficiently detailed to serve as guidance for the design of Phase II improvements.

Site Description: Point St. George is a scenic windswept headland located just northwest of Crescent City in Del Norte County, approximately fifteen miles south of the California-Oregon border. Del Norte is California's northernmost county, with a population of just under 30,000 people, most of whom reside in the Crescent City area. Acquired by the County in 2002 in part with Coastal Conservancy funds, the 339-acre coastal terrace with its steep cliffs, offshore sea stacks and crashing surf is increasingly appreciated and used by local people and Redwood Coast visitors. A small private inholding consisting of a primary residence and several small structures exists within the Point St. George property just west of the principal parking lot at the terminus of Radio Road (Exhibit 2, Pt. St. George site map).

The prominence of Pt. St. George on the northwest coast was not lost on the indigenous people of the area, the Tolowa tribe. For centuries before the arrival of Europeans, ancestors of the present-day Tolowa, made use of the headland. Archaeological surveys and radiocarbon dating of artifacts suggest that the site was used since roughly 310 B.C. placing it among the earliest occupied sites in the region.

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The dramatic interaction of the ocean and rocky shore is exceptional at Point St. George. The headland's steep bluffs drop to rocky pocket beaches and intertidal shelves, some accessible by trail, others enclosed by towering cliffs and sea. The coastal terrace itself features a vast panorama: to the north, across Pelican Bay and its lonely expanse of sandy beach, lie the coastal mountains of southern Oregon; to the west, six miles offshore on the seemingly open sea, is the St. George Reef Light Station, a critical beacon for navigation since 1892; to the south are Castle Rock, the biggest coastal island north of the Farralone Islands, the many sea stacks offshore of Crescent City's Pebble Beach, and the forested cliffs of the Redwood Coast; and to the east, the forests and snowy peaks of California's Siskiyou Mountains. Inland and to the east of the bluffs, the land slopes gently to the southeast with the lowest elevations being in the vicinity of the airport. This area contains a large depression that collects water during the rainy season and slowly dries as the seasonal drought proceeds. Among the several unusual plant species found here is the increasingly rare western lily, one of several species that benefit from periodic management to control competitive vegetation that in former times was grazed by wild animals and burned by indigenous people. A 1991 survey found the Oregon silverspot butterfly, the Yontucket ringlet butterfly, the Wolf's evening primrose, the black crowberry, and the Artic starflower, all rare species. The rocky coast snail and the sand dune phacelia were found in adjacent habitats on Point St. George.

Over 100 different bird species have been sighted at Point St. George. Most renowned among these is likely the Aleutian Cackling Goose. Large congregations of these geese roost in the winter on Castle Rock and other inaccessible sea stacks, flying onshore to feed in the early morning and returning in the evening. The Aleutian Goose Festival, held in March, has grown to be an important component of Del Norte County winter tourism.

Project History: The Conservancy first worked with Del Norte County and the former owners of the principal Point St. George parcels in the early 1990's in an effort to resolve issues necessary for appropriate development under the Coastal Act. Despite extensive mapping, biological surveys and site analyses performed then, a development plan acceptable to the property owner did not materialize. In the ensuing decade the value of the site's unusual resources became more widely known and appreciated, and, in 2001, the owners of the property contacted the Conservancy to explore a potential sale for conservation purposes.

In 2002, the Conservancy approved the Point St. George Conceptual Enhancement Plan, and provided funds to Del Norte County for the acquisition of the Pt. St. George property and preparation of a management plan. The management plan, prepared in a public process overseen by a Task Force organized for this purpose, focused on protecting the natural and cultural resources of the site, as recommended in the the Conservancy's conceptual enhancement plan.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$340,000
County of Del Norte (in-kind)	20,000

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (in-kind)	20,000
Total Project Cost	\$380,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from the Conservancy's FY 03/04 appropriation from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) which can be used to protect and enhance coastal land and water resources pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapters 6 (enhancement) and 9 (public access) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, sections 31000 *et seq.* Under Section 31251, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the purpose of enhancement of coastal resources which, because of human-induced events, or incompatible land uses, have suffered loss of natural and scenic values.

As required in Section 31252, the proposed project is consistent with the Del Norte County Local Coastal Program as described in the Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies below.

Under Section 31253, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any coastal resource enhancement project. Consistent with this section, the proposed authorization provides the substantial financial resources for the project with in-kind contributions provided by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Del Norte County.

Section 31400 of the Public Resources Code states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. In the proposed project, the Conservancy's funding will contribute to two miles of California Coastal Trail designation and important site planning to improve the primary parking lot, provide restrooms, and interpretive elements needed to make this prominent coastal asset fully accessible to the public, thus furthering the purposes of §31400.

Under Section 31400.1 the Conservancy may award grants to any public agency to acquire or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coastline. Section 31400.3 enables the Conservancy to aid public agencies in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. Consistent with these sections, in providing funds to Del Norte County for implementing Phase I of the Pt. St. George Enhancement Program, the Conservancy will be taking a significant action to assist a local government to improve public access to coastal resources that serves the needs of the local community as well as visitors from outside the region.

Under Section 31400.2 the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the acquisition of the initial development of public accessways by any public agency for

purposes of the chapter. The amount of funding proposed for the Conservancy contribution to the project has been determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, an evaluation of project eligibility and priority to effectively meet the provisions of the division, and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project is widely supported by elected officials and members of the public. Letters of support are included as Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Del Norte County.
5. **Need:** Del Norte County and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fully support the project with their own labor and organization of significant volunteer efforts. However, Coastal Conservancy support is critically needed to address initial site protection and enhancement to ensure that sensitive natural and cultural resources are not damaged or lost.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Point St. George is increasingly well-known to Del Norte County residents and visitors to the Redwood Coast. Because of its proximity to Crescent City lodgings, the site has high potential for increased use once facilities are provided to adequately accommodate them.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Unregulated off-road vehicle use poses a significant threat to the cultural and natural resources of the site including rare plants and archaeological relics. Now in public ownership, measures are urgently needed to safeguard these resources as proposed with this authorization.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Public access, resource enhancement and cultural and historic preservation are inherently intertwined at Point St. George. Solutions that would be provided through this authorization necessarily would provide guidance and facilities that address all of these issues.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

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10. **Conflict resolution:** Significant conflicts exist at Point St. George as a result of ineffective fencing and historic misuse of the site by off-road vehicles and others who either knowingly or inadvertently have degraded rare habitats and cultural sites. The Phase I project is needed to address these conflicts.
11. **Innovation:** The community has expressed a strong desire to maintain the wild nature of the site. The balancing of development needed for protecting natural and cultural resources of the site with its wild nature will require design innovation.
12. **Readiness:** Del Norte County has committed itself to implementing the project as quickly as possible to achieve its maximum benefits before more harm is done to the site.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
14. **Cooperation:** To date, the Point St. George project has been an excellent example of cooperation by public and nonprofit organizations including County of Del Norte, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Fish and Game, Wildlife Conservation Board, State Parks, members of the Tolowa tribe, and other local organizations. It is expected that this cooperation will continue as the project moves into the implementation phase.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

Del Norte County’s local coastal plan (“LCP”) was certified on October 12, 1983. On August 12, 1986, the Point St. George property became an official segment of the LCP. The LCP recognizes the value of sensitive coastal habitats and supported the Coastal Conservancy’s acquiring Point St. George. In support of the proposed authorization, Section II.I states: “Each coastal zone recreational area, must be studied individually to determine its optimum recreational use level.” Section VI B. establishes that the Del Norte County General Plan “... recognizes the importance of biologically sensitive habitats and seeks to conserve and manage these resources for ... the needs of present and future generations.” Among the County’s zoning ordinances that implement the LCP, Chapter 21.35.040, E.4 states: “The design and construction by any public entity of a shoreline access facility (e.g., parking, trails, stairways, etc.) shall consider safety from potential vandalism and the protection of fragile resources.”

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA: On May 2, 2005, the County of Del Norte filed a Notice of Exemption under the California Environmental Quality Act for the project citing 14 Cal. Code of Regs. Sections 15301, 15302, 15304, 15306, 15311(a) and (b). Staff believes that the proposed guardrail and parking lot improvements are categorically exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15301(c) and (f), which exempts minor alteration of existing streets, gutters and similar facilities, and the addition of safety protection devices for use in conjunction with existing structures or topographical features. The proposed Coastal Trail project element qualifies for exemption under Section 15304(d), which exempts minor alterations in land, water and vegetation on existing wildlife management areas which result in improvement of habitat. The proposed fencing project is exempt under Section 15302(c), in that the project will involve the

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replacement or reconstruction of fencing which involves negligible expansion of capacity. Planning elements of the project are exempt under Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Proposed directional and interpretive signs are exempt under Section 15311, which specifically exempts on-premise signs. In addition, staff believes the planning tasks undertaken pursuant to this authorization are statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA under Section 15262, as this task involves only data gathering, planning, and feasibility analyses for possible future actions. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.